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# The Circle Is Closing on Honduras

PUERTO LEMPIRA, Honduras—As we were flying low over the impenetrable Montanas de Colon on the way to this suddenly aroused village at the remote eastern tip of Honduras, signs multiplied of coming conflict here between the communist and non-communist worlds—Latin America's "central conflict" in the words of a Honduran political leader.

"Those mountains have never been mapped," our guide told us, gesturing toward the rugged panorama below. "No one knows where the real border [between Honduras and Marxist-controlled Nicaragua] is." That explains recent deployment of the Fifth Battalion of the minuscule Honduran army into the uninhabited border areas near this desolate stretch of seacoast.

Honduras is running scared. The communist world—Cuba, the Soviet Union, East Germany, Bulgaria—is pouring the stuff of war and propaganda into Central America. The United States, belatedly awake to the "central crisis," is countering. But confidence that the United States will stay the course is not high here or in any other Central American state. Every utterance in the U.S. Congress gets avid attention. There is genuine fear of future sellout.

And little wonder, judging from this contrast: aggression from the communist superpower; defensive reaction, too often halfhearted, from the American superpower.

Near this fishing village a dangerously short dirt runway has been lengthened and widened by U.S. Navy Seabees. Ostensibly, the need for a decent runway is to accommodate C130 transports that carry food and supplies to tens of thousands of Miskito Indians uprooted from ancestral villages just across the Nicaraguan border a few miles south of here.

Fleeing Sandinista brutality, they are now under international refugee care in Honduras a few miles from Puerto Lempira. There are no roads.

In reality, though nobody mentions it, the refurbished airstrip would be converted overnight to military uses if the Honduras-based anti-Sandinista forces were defeated and, in reprisal, Honduras were punished by Nicaragua. "We are not completely stupid," a Honduran military leader advised us back in the capital of Tegucigalpa. "If the anti-Sandinistas fail, we will be made to pay even if the U.S. stays with us."

Nicaragua is seeding the ground with dragon teeth. A Nicaraguan agent posing as a *campesino* recently was picked up in Puerto Lempira, where any stranger is conspicuous. He carried

a radio receiver tuned to a transmitter in Nicaragua which sent him coded messages at designated times. He was ordered here to establish contacts, arrange drop points for future visits and perform other well-known tricks of the subversion/sabotage trade.

Hidden deep in the mountains we had flown over to get here is a suspected Marxist guerrilla headquarters on the Honduran side of the border. "We can't find it, but we know it is down there," our guide said in the plane. Honduran military leaders told us that a complete set of anti-Honduran war plans developed by the Sandinistas has been "picked up." Part of the assignment of the Nicaraguan intelligence agent arrested here clearly was to probe the disposition of the Fifth Battalion, the first military force Honduras has ever had to deploy anywhere near this remote region.

Propaganda from radio transmitters at a half-dozen places in Nicaragua comes across the border day and night. The Hondurans have no means to make an effective reply. The kept Sandinista press in Managua spews out threats against Honduras, quoting Honduran insurgents as saying late last month that "hundreds of U.S. military advisers and CIA agents operate inside" Honduras. The targets of such threats are nervous congressmen in Washington as much as fearful Hondurans.

Beyond propaganda, the Sandinista intelligence network has already been planted. On April 8, four insurgency groups set up a Unified Revolutionary Coordinating Board to win "the struggle in Honduras." Consequently, to protect U.S. diplomats in Tegucigalpa, security has been drastically tightened; the new U.S.-built radar station near the capital is under 24-hour guard.

Gen. Gustavo Alvarez, who commands Honduras' modest armed forces, privately makes no secret of his government's fear about the credibility of U.S. promises and the continuity of its policy. He flew secretly to Washington last week seeking reassurance, knowing that the circle is beginning to close on Honduras as it has on Nicaragua and El Salvador.